

Use of Embryonic Stem Cells: Unethical and Unnecessary

The Church's Opinion on Embryonic Stem Cell Use

The decision by the Prime Minister, John Howard, to allow a conscience vote on therapeutic cloning has been greeted with enthusiasm by the media, and some politicians, as making good sense.

From a political viewpoint, maybe; from the embryo's viewpoint, no sense at all; in terms of an embryo being no more than little bunches of cells, maybe; in terms of the embryo being a human being with ongoing potential, no way.

The Catholic Church has an extremely clear teaching about embryos: they are human beings in early stage of development, beings created by God in whose image they are made.

From the earliest Christian times the Church has taught that it is immoral to destroy human life. For this reason, human life, once conceived, must be protected. Pope John Paul II's encyclical Gospel of Life is succinct: "The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception."

Since the Church considers the embryo a distinct human being it is entitled to all the rights and protection of any other human being. That human life begins at conception (fertilisation) is not opinion but scientific fact. The only difference between an unborn embryo and a newborn baby is one of development and location.

The Church does not question research in the fields of medicine and biology with the aim of curing disease, or improving the quality of life, provided it is respectful of the dignity of the human being. This respect demands that any research that is inconsistent with the dignity of the human being is excluded on moral grounds.

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Dignity

Dignity, as defined here, means the intrinsic worth that is commonly and equally shared by all human beings, whatever their social, intellectual, or physical condition.

It is this dignity that obliges all of us to respect every human being whatever his or her condition. And all the more so if he or she is in need of protection and care.

Dignity is the basis of all human rights; we respect the rights of others because we first recognise their dignity.

Common sense and honesty suggests, therefore, that if a specific course of research has already demonstrated success, and raises no ethical questions, it should be pursued before embarking on another that has shown little prospect of success and raises ethical concerns. Clearly, the human embryos, whether conceived naturally by IVF, or by cloning, should not be created in order to be destroyed.

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Adult v. Embryonic

The question then is about which stem cells should be used. Adult cells which appear to perform all the function of embryonic stem cells, have three major advantages:

1. They do not require the destruction of an embryo.
2. They avoid the problem of immunological rejection.
3. They already have a proven track record in treating patients.

For these reasons there is no argument about adult stem cells being used for human research as they do not entail ethical problems.

On the other hand, research using human embryonic stem cells is hampered by important technical difficulties. The embryonic stem cell experiments have not yet produced a single, unqualified, therapeutic success, not even in animal models.

Moreover, they have caused tumors in animal models, which could seed cancer if administered to human patients.

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Ethical Questions

Putting technical problems aside, the need to extract embryonic stem cells from living human embryos raises ethical questions of the highest order:

1. The process to obtain them destroys the human embryo and it is never justified to destroy a human life even to save another.
2. There is still much speculation about the potential of embryonic stem cells.
3. Many of the cell lines are in the hands of private companies. There is big money to be made in the multi-billion-dollar biotech industry and there is always the real concern of companies making profit the major consideration.
4. The use of embryonic stem cells is in violation of various codes of human rights which state that voluntary consent is absolutely essential in medical research, and which prohibit experimentation that causes injury, disability or a person's death.

Proponents of embryonic stem cell experimentation should be made to answer the following questions:

(a) What do they make of the fact that, to date, embryonic stem cells cannot be used therapeutically because they cause tumours in the animals into which they have been injected?

(b) There is a biological complexity involved. Why is it that no one is even close to understanding why this happens?

(c) If the use of embryonic stem cells is questionable why has embryonic stem cell research been so grotesquely hyped by its advocates?

(d) Why is it that there has been so little public discussion about the fact that adult stem cell therapies are being used extensively today in treating diseases?

(e) If the private sector biotech firms are pouring research dollars into adult stem cell research therapies with some success, why are some scientists directing Government to fund embryonic stem cell research?

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Conclusion

I don't doubt that the media and proponents of the embryonic stem cell argument will try to ridicule the Catholic input as outdated moral platitudes versus genuine human need; archaic religion versus progressive science; Christian ethicists against suffering celebrities; religious fundamentalists versus science and enlightenment.

But the truth remains that any use of research, technology or proposed therapeutic procedures, which involves the destruction of the human embryo should be banned altogether as unethical and unnecessary.

Legalising the creation of IVF or cloned human embryos destined to be destroyed for medical research is an awesome responsibility for lawmakers to assume.